NOTEBOOK PHILOSOPHY

How to Make Your Own Commonplace Book

A History, Analysis, & Tips for Organizing CPBs

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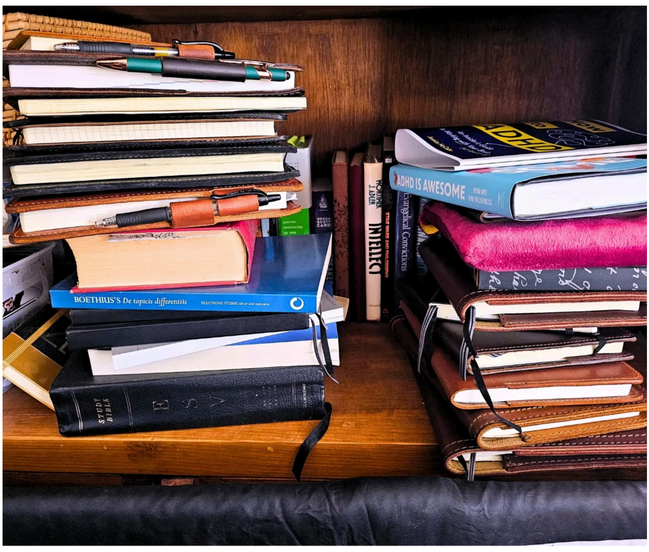

I love commonplace books. Like most people who advocate their use, I fell into the practice out of necessity only to discover it's a thing lots and lots of people do, going back through the ancient Roman rhetoricians, all the way to at least King Solomon, but probably back even further.

Over the past three or four years, I've noticed a massive interest in commonplace books so I decided to take a deep dive into their history. Along with my historical dive, I started analyzing the different ways I've been using my commonplace books and researching how other thinkers like to use theirs, in order to help my audiences know which method is best for them.

I've been working on a book proposal recently, so a lot of this has been fresh in my mind and I figured it'd be good to get it all down somewhere that I can look back on to refresh myself.

So, this will be a summary of what I've learned about commonplace books, as well as my own analysis of the four different kinds of commonplace books you can keep. Some of that will have been covered in other posts and ParkNotes videos on YouTube but never with this much depth and clarity and not all in one spot. I'm also dropping in some new gems on how to actually create the 'common places' necessary for sorting quotations in one's commonplace book. I have three methods to help you generate those—and that's all brand new stuff you won't find anywhere else.

So, for those who support me on here, here's where we're going beyond the pay wall:

1. I'll take you through a history of the concept of 'commonplaces'.
2. I'll cover the four *differentiae* you can use to determine which kind of commonplace book is best for you (don't worry if you don't know that word, you will after this!)
3. I'll give you three ways to generate the 'commonplaces' or headings or categories needed for actually organizing your commonplace books so you can retrieve the information or quotations you're looking for.

If you're interested in my thoughts on commonplace books, here's a playlist of all the ParkNotes videos I've done on them thus far, but again none of them will have my new thoughts on on how to make commonplaces yet, that's brand new here on this post beyond the pay wall:

https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtUIln3A0Wz6nWCvSn_uRbHOIOHwfGbiQ&si=uCmBkkZrQr48s517

So, let's jump into the history of commonplace books and then on to how to make your own.

A Quick History of Commonplace Books in The Western Philosophical Tradition

The term 'commonplaces' can be traced all the way back to Aristotle. Artistotle's κοινοι τοποι (commonplaces (loci communes in Latin)) first appeared in his *Topica* sometime around 335 to 323 BC. The *Topica* is found in his six-volume work on logic called the *Organon*. Aristotle's 'commonplaces' were something like

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